

A HAVEN ON EARTH

THE MUCH ANTICIPATED WHISPER CREEK DEVELOPMENT ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF CHRISTCHURCH, WILL GIVE NEW ZEALAND ITS FIRST SIR NICK FALDO DESIGNED GOLF COURSE... WITH LOCAL INPUT

For nearly four years the golf course has been taking shape in our heads. The idea is for a natural looking course, using the gentle topography to craft a course sharing elements of the classic links which I know so well but, in a unique twist, combining these landforms with expansive native wetland areas which will be created leading down to the Styx River.

So says Sir Nick Faldo, whose company,

Faldo Design, has been commissioned to design a new golf course, Whisper Creek, which will form part of a residential and sports development to the northeast of Christchurch.

Working alongside Faldo Design on the project is Christchurch based firm Kura Golf Design, whose principal architect Kristine

Kerr expects work on the site to begin in earnest in March next year with the course hopefully open for play early in 2016.

And when the first sod of earth

is turned you can be sure no one will be more overjoyed than Thomas Na, the South Korean-born developer who divides his time between his native land and New Zealand.

Whisper Creek is Na's brainchild, one that has taken more than a decade to get to its current stage and one that represents a departure from his usual developments.

"This is a first for him," Kerr reveals. "His background is in creating English language schools."

Although the Whisper Creek development is part residential – houses and apartments – as well as the golf course it will feature a purpose-built academy, expected to attract international students, principally from Europe and Asia, who wish either to learn to play golf or to become golf managers.

The academy, which will be able to take 160 students at any one time, also includes student accommodation.

According to Kerr, Na has a clear image of what he wants Whisper Creek to be. His choice of name for the development is representative of that, and the ideology is supported by his golf course architects.

"It's about Whisper Creek being a sanctuary, about creating a beautiful place and a peaceful environment where people can live and for golf to be played," says Kerr. "A feature of the course will be the lakes, streams and creeks that meander quietly through the landscape."

As someone who was forced recently to move out of her earthquake damaged house while repairs were done, Kerr is well aware that a development offering a sanctuary-like environment on stable, relatively flat land will appeal to Canterbury locals.

"Because of the earthquakes, Christchurch lost a lot of its prime housing stock up on the hills. A lot of people don't want to be on the hills anymore and we can offer them something different."

The house lots are generous in size, averaging about 2000sqm. The housing will be sited on the top tier – the development is situated over two terraces – with the apartments built to sit over the water, similar in concept to some of the accommodation at Clearwater.

At 6600m, Whisper Creek will become the longest championship course in New Zealand. It will also be the first Kiwi course to carry the Faldo Design signature.

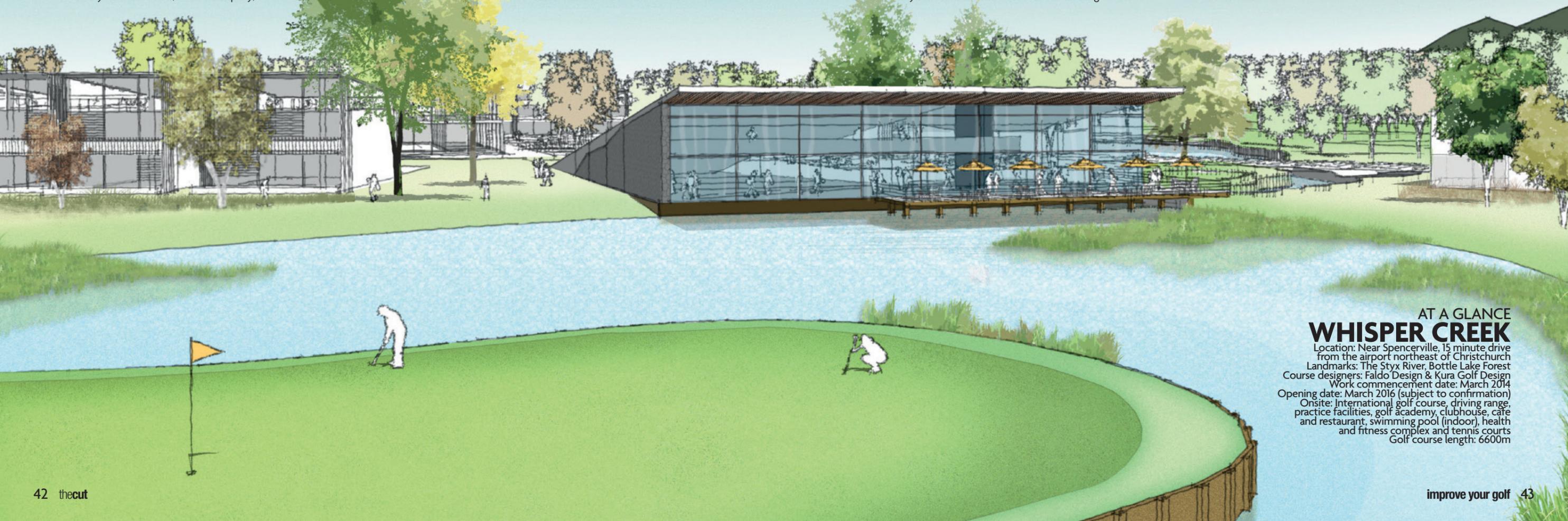
Kerr says Sir Nick has not yet been onsite but he is expected out here before the earthworks commence. His chief designer, Guy Hockley, who Kerr has worked with previously, has visited the property.

Faldo's company has been involved in the project since 2009, and Kerr since 2007 when, as an employee of Boffa Miskell, she worked on the master plan.

The reason for the length of the project is manifold. Kerr explains: "Because we wanted to make the consent process as straightforward as possible, we tried to give the council and Environment Canterbury as much information about the development and design as we could at that early stage so any questions they had we could respond to immediately, or the answers were there. For example, we presented an initial earthworks plan which is typically done further down the line."

"Pre the earthquakes, the council and Environment Canterbury had in fact not given approval to the project based on the number of houses associated with the development, and although it complied with what was the current plan some new rules were being drafted and council thought the project would not comply with the new plan still to be adopted."

It is ironic that the earthquakes actually assisted the development because suddenly a new stock of housing land was needed.



AT A GLANCE WHISPER CREEK

Location: Near Spencerville, 15 minute drive from the airport northeast of Christchurch
Landmarks: The Styx River, Bottle Lake Forest
Course designers: Faldo Design & Kura Golf Design
Work commencement date: March 2014
Opening date: March 2016 (subject to confirmation)
Onsite: International golf course, driving range, practice facilities, golf academy, clubhouse, cafe and restaurant, swimming pool (indoor), health and fitness complex and tennis courts
Golf course length: 6600m

"Prior to that we'd been in the appeal process," says Kerr. Although the earthquakes helped in some ways to push through the project, they also caused delays.

"We had to do a lot more geo-tech investigation," says Kerr. "Land is categorised into different technical categories – TC1, TC2 and TC3. The site is in two tiers, with the upper tier TC1 and TC2. There are virtually no earthquake issues with TC1 land and only minor ones with TC2. Most of our TC3 land is on the lower tier where there will be no housing."

Because the plan includes building lakes on the lower terrace, which will change the nature of the geography, further geo-tech investigations were required.

But Kerr says any impact from the earthquakes is minor. "Near the Styx River the land has dropped slightly, 100 to 200mm in parts, but it's not actually part of the development."

Because there are no plans to build a hotel on the property, the golf course is designed to be of championship standard rather than suitable for a resort; hence the five sets of tees on each hole.

"Nick Faldo likes strategic golf, and that's very much how I design," says Kerr. "He was known as a strategic player and that translates to his design ethos.

"What strategy means, or how it is best incorporated in a course, is about the choices available to golfers from each tee. You allow a relatively safe path so that every golfer can get to the green in regulation and make par but you also provide opportunities for them to take on a challenge, such as flying a bunker or dicing with water. If they can overcome the various challenges, there's the possibility of them bettering their score."

How best to describe the course? Is it links or is it parkland? According to Kerr, it's neither.

"It's actually a bit difficult to put a label on because we're starting with a site which has a relatively linky foundation and we're winding it through wetlands that are being created."

Kerr reveals that the developers are donating to the council a 41-hectare strip of land adjacent to the river as an

ecological corridor. The council's vision is to reinstate the land as native wetlands.

"We'll be bringing that theme through the course by also creating wetlands on the lower terrace. In that regard, I think the landscape will be quite unique."

Yes, there will be trees on the course, largely native plantings, but fairways will not be typically tree lined.

The course will feature a variety of waste bunkers, typically in more out-of-play areas, plus more formal bunkers.

"In terms of sustainability, we will not have masses of bunkers simply for the sake of having them," states Kerr. "The waste bunkers are unmaintained sandy areas with native grasses randomly sprouting up through it."

Water will be in play on the majority of holes, the creeks, streams and lakes – likely to number seven – all intertwined. Island greens are a feature of holes 3 and 18.

Kerr offers a description: "The third hole is a little par three, playing over wetlands, and a bit of water wraps around the green, with a bunker also wrapping around the green so there is some relief. If you miss the green, the bunker is going to rescue you. It's going to be a very pretty hole. ▶

SCORECARD

Hole	Par	Black	Blue	White	Red	Gold	Hole	Par	Black	Blue	White	Red	Gold
1	4	408	389	362	333	303	10	4	397	379	354	345	311
2	4	442	419	391	363	319	11	4	371	342	308	302	283
3	3	243	221	189	154	129	12	3	170	159	151	138	120
4	4	293	274	256	251	236	13	5	554	520	493	459	436
5	4	451	436	416	381	339	14	4	394	372	344	310	272
6	5	464	440	417	406	379	15	3	182	157	146	136	119
7	4	370	352	339	312	280	16	4	324	312	281	269	243
8	3	197	177	168	157	134	17	5	479	457	417	397	361
9	5	540	512	487	453	413	18	4	370	364	352	311	292
TOTAL 72									6649	3282	5871	5477	4969



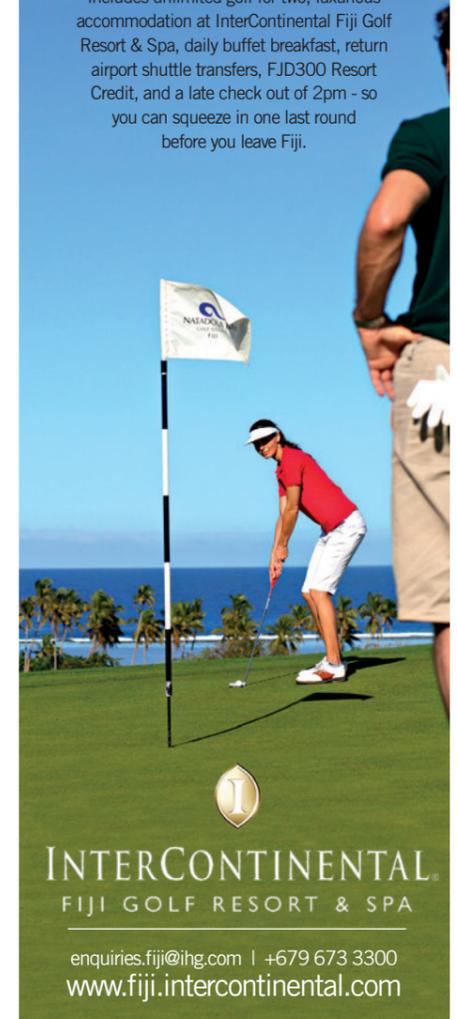
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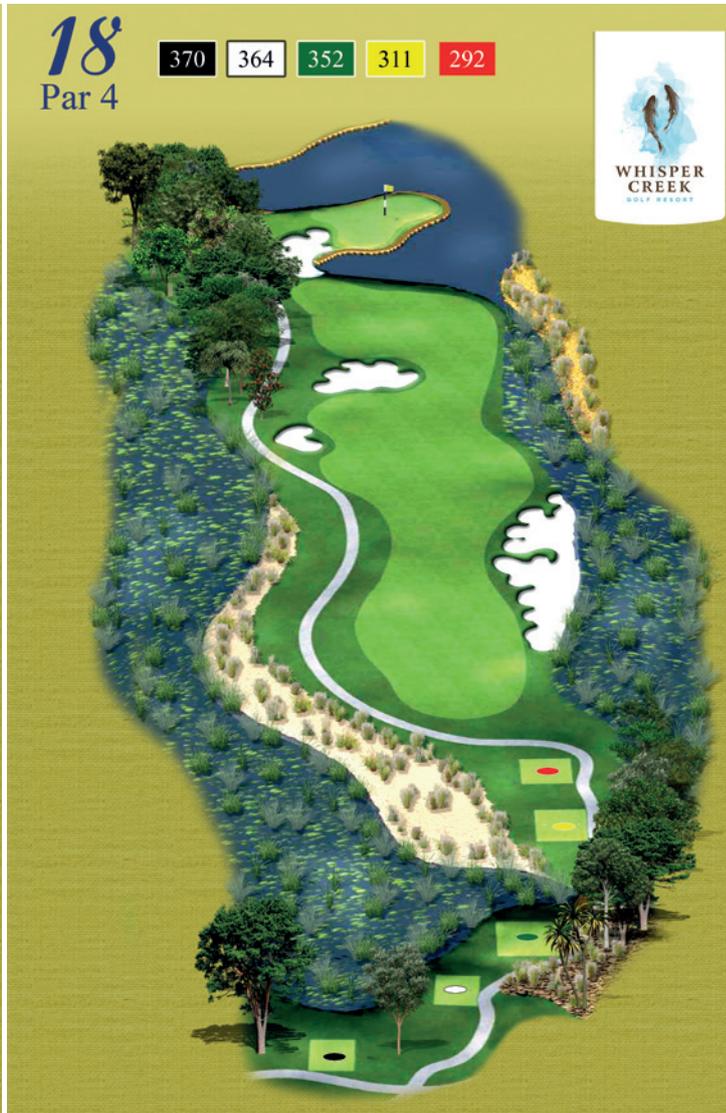
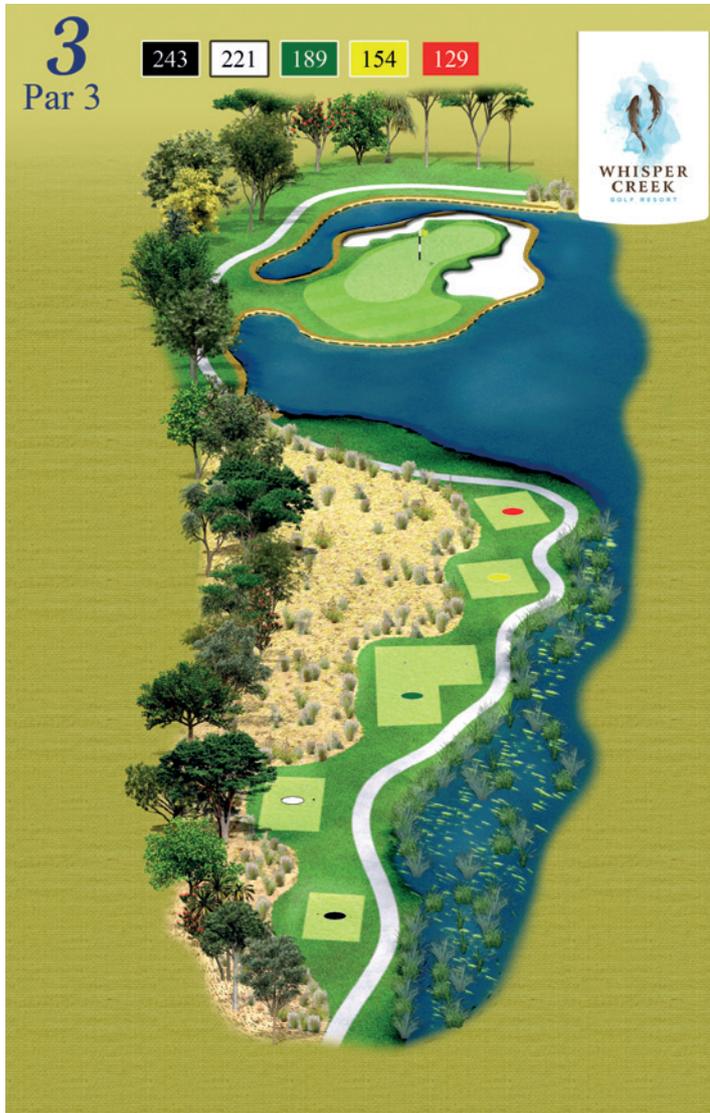
Don't say you haven't been warned though - with sparkling backdrop of coral reefs and the Pacific Ocean on 15 out of the 18 holes, keeping your concentration will be a challenge!

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ABOVE: Holes three and 18 are the standout holes, according to golf course architect, Kristine Kerr, who is working alongside Faldo Design on the Whisper Creek project.

Both holes feature testing island greens,

“Hole eighteen, which is in front of the clubhouse, is also an island green. It’s a par four. The option is with your second shot, do you lay up before attempting a short iron into the green or do you go for the island green in two? There’s not so much opportunity for a bailout area on this hole so you really need to be feeling brave.”

Are there, in her opinion, any particularly memorable holes? “Certainly three and eighteen, but in creating the design you make each hole different. I always find it hard to pick a favourite because in creating each one you want them all to be memorable.”

Kerr’s philosophy mirrors Faldo’s. Of the course, he states: “Memorability is another key for me – each hole must have real character and individuality, both in how it plays and also in its visual appearance, and these should intertwine and form a distinctive personality for each hole.

“It’s important to me that there are numerous ways to play each hole and always an opportunity to be inventive with your shots – using the ground’s contours as much as the aerial route.”

Kerr suggests that Whisper Creek could be likened to a TPC (Tournament Players Club) course, “Because as Sir Nick has said, we want it to have the ‘wow’ factor. So while the aim is for it to look natural within its environment, to sit lightly on the land, in essence we will be creating what we hope will be a peaceful experience.”

Kerr says the housing lots and the golf course are designed very much to be integrated. “When you are in the residential area you have a relationship with the wider

landscape. It’s almost not like living on a golf course because there will be the wetlands, lakes and the landscape.”

Wildlife, in the form of trout in the streams and native birds, are expected to make the course their home, and to add to the sanctuary theme. The trout features on the Whisper Creek logo.

Although a key part of the design is to make the course look as though it is formed from the land’s natural contours, in fact 700,000 cubic metres of dirt will have to be shifted.

“We are raising the land on the top tier so that the residential sections will be above the course, and we will also be creating the lakes, which will provide us with fill material to shape the course.”

Kerr says the earthworks will take roughly a year to complete and ideally a six months grow-in time for grass is required.

The fairways will be sown in grasses similar to what she has used on other courses in Canterbury, a fine fescue mix, as they suit the environment, and a variety of browntop will be used on the greens and tees. She says a new one used at the Arrowtown and Waimairi golf courses is performing well, and as an added bonus it provides a nice colour contrast.

According to Faldo, Whisper Creek “will be a one-off”.

“In ecological terms our footprint is intended as light yet productive, with waterways and reintroduced native planting leading to much more diverse wildlife habitats and plant populations across the property.”

Whisper Creek looks certain to provide the people of Christchurch, and visitors, with a much-needed sanctuary, a peaceful place to live or play. ☺